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ABSTRACT

This digest was adapted from D.W. Russell, D.G. Hayes and L.B. Dockery's book, "My Child is Gifted! Now What Do I Do?". The digest is intended to give parents of gifted students an overview of characteristics of gifted children and terminology used in this field. Several definitions of giftedness are offered including one from a parent group emphasizing the interaction with the environment and one from a U.S. government report identifying six types of giftedness. Fourteen general characteristics typically used by educational authorities as indicative of giftedness are listed. The nature of intelligence itself is briefly discusssed. Other terms parents might hear in the context of gifted children are explained including: genius, talented, prodigy, precocious, superior, rapid learner, exceptional, and elitism. Includes five references. (DB)

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GIFTEDNESS AND THE GIFTED: WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

What Does Giftedness Mean?

Many parents say, "I know what giftedness is, but I can't put it into words." This generally is followed by reference to a particular child who seems to manifest gifted behaviors. Unfortunately, there are many misconceptions of the term, all of which become deterrents to understanding and catering to the needs of children identified as gifted. Let's study the following statement:

> Giftedness is that precious endowment of potentially outstanding abilities which allows a person to interact with the environment with remarkably high levels of achievement and creativity.

This statement is the product of a small neighborhood group of parents who took a comprehensive view of the concept of giftedness before focusing on any attempt to define the gifted child. They thought, first, that within giftedness is a quality of innateness (or, as they said, "a gift conferred by nature"), and second, that one's environment is the arena in which the gifts come into play and develop. Therefore, they reasoned that the "remarkably high levels of achievement and creativity" result from a continuous and functional interaction between a person's inherent and acquired abilities and characteristics.

We often hear statements such as "She's a born artist," or "He's a natural athlete," or conversely, "Success never came easy for me; I had to learn the hard way," or "He's a self-made man." Those who manifest giftedness obviously have some inherent or inborn factors plus the motivation and stamina to learn from and cope with the rigors of living.

We suggest that you wrestle with the term in your own way, looking at giftedness as a concept that demands the investment of time, money, and energy. This will help you discuss giftedness more meaningfully with other parents, school administrators, school board members, or anyone who needs to understand the dynamics of the term.

Who Are Gifted Children?

Former U.S. Commissioner of Education Sidney P. Marland, Jr., in his August 1971 report to Congress, stated, "Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society."

The same report continued:

> Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas, singly or in combination:
>
> 1. general intellectual ability
> 2. specific academic aptitude
> 3. creative or productive thinking
> 4. leadership ability
> 5. visual or performing arts
> 6. psychomotor ability

Using a broad definition of giftedness, a school system could expect to identify 10% to 15% or more of its student population as gifted and talented. A brief description of each area of giftedness or talent as defined by the Office of Gifted and Talented will help you understand this definition.

General intellectual ability or talent. Laypersons and educators alike usually define this in terms of a high intelligence test score—usually two standard deviations above the mean—on individual or group measures. Parents and teachers often recognize students with general intellectual talent by their wide-ranging fund of general information and high levels of vocabulary, memory, abstract word knowledge, and abstract reasoning.

Specific academic aptitude or talent. Students with specific academic aptitudes are identified by their out-

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standing performance on an achievement or aptitude test in one area such as mathematics or language arts. The organizers of talent searches sponsored by a number of universities and colleges identify students with specific academic aptitude who score at the 97th percentile or higher on standard achievement tests and then give these students the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Remarkably large numbers of students score at these high levels.

Creative and productive thinking. This is the ability to produce new ideas by bringing together elements usually thought of as independent or dissimilar—the aptitude for developing new meanings that have social value. Characteristics of creative and productive students include openness to experience, setting personal standards for evaluation, ability to play with ideas, willingness to take risks, preference for complexity, tolerance for ambiguity, positive self-image, and the ability to become submerged in a task. Creative and productive students are identified through the use of tests such as the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking or through demonstrated creative performance.

Leadership ability. Leadership can be defined as the ability to direct individuals or groups to a common decision or action. Students who demonstrate giftedness in leadership ability use group skills and negotiate in difficult situations. Many teachers recognize leadership through a student's keen interest and skill in problem solving. Leadership characteristics include self-confidence, responsibility, cooperation, a tendency to dominate, and the ability to adapt readily to new situations. These students can be identified through instruments such as the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation Behavior (FIRO-B).

Visual and performing arts. Gifted students with talent in the arts demonstrate special talents in visual art, music, dance, drama, or other related studies. These students can be identified by using task descriptions such as the Creative Products Scales, which were developed for the Detroit Public Schools by Patrick Byrons and Beverly Ness Parke of Wayne State University.

Psychomotor ability. This involves kinesthetic motor abilities such as practical, spatial, mechanical, and physical skills. It is seldom used as a criterion in gifted programs.

Other Viewpoints

Robert Sternberg and Robert Wagner (1982) have suggested that giftedness is a kind of mental self-management. The mental management of one's life in a constructive, purposeful way has three basic elements: adapting to environments, selecting new environments, and shaping environments. According to Sternberg and Wagner, the key psychological basis of intellectual giftedness resides in insight skills that include three main processes: (1) separating relevant from irrelevant information, (2) combining isolated pieces of information into a unified whole, and (3) relating newly acquired information to information acquired in the past.

Sternberg and Wagner emphasized problem-solving abilities and viewed the gifted student as one who processes information rapidly and uses insight abilities. Howard Gardner (1983) also suggested a concept of multiple intelligences, stating that there are several ways of viewing the world: linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligence.

Joseph Renzulli (1986) stated that gifted behavior reflects an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits: above-average general and/or specific abilities, high levels of task commitment (motivation), and high levels of creativity. According to Renzulli, gifted and talented children are those who possess or are capable of developing this composite of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance.

A good source for pursuing the characteristics of giftedness in depth is Barbara Clark's informative book, *Growing Up Gifted* (1988), which presents an exhaustive list of characteristics under five major headings: Cognitive (thinking), Affective (feeling), Physical, Intuitive, and Societal.

No one child manifests all of the attributes described by researchers and the Office of Gifted and Talented. Nevertheless, it is important for parents to be fully aware of the ways in which giftedness can be recognized. Often, certain behaviors such as constantly having unique solutions to problems, asking endless, probing questions, or even the masterful manipulation of others are regarded by parents as unnatural, unlike other children, and trying to parental patience. Therefore, our recommendation is to study the characteristics of gifted children with an open mind. Do not use the list as a scorecard; simply discuss and appreciate the characteristics and let common sense, coupled with love, take over.

Some General Characteristics

(These are typical factors stressed by educational authorities as being indicative of giftedness. Obviously, no child is outstanding in all characteristics.)

1. Shows superior reasoning powers and marked ability to handle ideas; can generalize readily from specific facts and can see subtle relationships; has outstanding problem-solving ability.

2. Shows persistent intellectual curiosity; asks searching questions; shows exceptional interest in the nature of man and the universe.
3. Has a wide range of interests, often of an intellectual kind; develops one or more interests to considerable depth.
4. Is markedly superior in quality and quantity of written and/or spoken vocabulary; is interested in the subtleties of words and their uses.
5. Reads avidly and absorbs books well beyond his or her years.
6. Learns quickly and easily and retains what is learned; recalls important details, concepts and principles; comprehends readily.
7. Shows insight into arithmetical problems that require careful reasoning and grasps mathematical concepts readily.
8. Shows creative ability or imaginative expression in such things as music, art, dance, drama; shows sensitivity and finesse in rhythm, movement, and bodily control.
9. Sustains concentration for lengthy periods and shows outstanding responsibility and independence in classroom work.
10. Sets realistically high standards for self; is self-critical in evaluating and correcting his or her own efforts.
11. Shows initiative and originality in intellectual work; shows flexibility in thinking and considers problems from a number of viewpoints.
12. Observes keenly and is responsive to new ideas.
13. Shows social poise and an ability to communicate with adults in a mature way.
14. Gets excitement and pleasure from intellectual challenge; shows an alert and subtle sense of humor.

A Quick Look at Intelligence

The attempts to define giftedness refer in one way or another to so-called "inborn" attributes, which, for lack of a better term, are called *intelligence*. Significant efforts have been made to measure intelligence, but, because the concept is elusive, test constructors simply aim at testing what they feel are typical manifestations of intelligence in behaviors. Perhaps a little rhyme used for years by kindergarten teachers will help to describe this elusiveness:

> *Nobody sees the wind; neither you, nor I. But when the trees bow down their heads, the wind is passing by.*

Just as we cannot actually see the wind, we cannot find, operate on, or transplant intelligence. Yet we see the working or manifestations of intelligence in the behaviors of people.

The man-made computation of an intelligence quotient, or IQ, is probably the best general indicator of intelligence, but in no way is it infallible. All too often, a child's IQ is misunderstood and becomes a lifelong "handle." However, given our present knowledge, the results of a standardized intelligence test administered by a competent examiner provide as reliable an indication as possible of a person's potential ability to learn and cope. Until some scientific breakthrough is developed, we will rely on the IQ score to approximate how mentally gifted a person may be.

The nature of intelligence was once explained in this way:

If intelligence were something you could see, touch, and weigh, it would be something like a can of paint. The genius would have a gallon, the person who has severe retardation, only half a pint. The rest of us would have varying amounts between these extremes, with the majority possessing about two quarts. This is clear enough, but it is only half the story.

Each can of paint contains the same five or six ingredients in varying amounts. One can may be "long" on oil, another on pigment, a third on turpentine, the fourth on gloss or drying agent. So, although two cans contain the same amount of paint, the paint may be of vastly different consistency, color, or character.

Good painters want to know the elements in the paint with which they are working. Parents and teachers want to know the kinds of intelligence with which they are working. What are the special qualities of this intelligence? In what proportions are these elements present? Most important, how can these elements be used?

We recommend that you do not become bogged down in probing into the concept of intelligence. Its intricacies and mysteries are fascinating, but it must not become a convenient synonym for giftedness. An excellent coverage of the concept of intelligence is provided by Barbara Clark in *Growing Up Gifted*.

The exciting advances in research on brain functioning, coupled with the realization that a child's intelligence is only one key to understanding giftedness, have underscored the importance of studying *all* characteristics of the gifted child.

The Gifted Child Is Called Many Things

Often parents are confused by the many terms used in referring to the gifted child. Many parents hear these terms used—sometimes adopting them in their

own conversations—without knowing whether they are synonymous with "gifted" or are just words that help to explain the concept.

The term *genius* used to be widely employed but now it is reserved for reference only to the phenomenally gifted person. *Talented* tends to be used when referring to a particular strength or ability of a person. Thought should be given to whether the talent is truly a gift or is, rather, an ability that has become a highly developed skill through practice. It is safe to say that generally the person identified as gifted is one who has multiple talents of a high order.

The terms *prodigy* and *precocious* are most commonly used when a child evidences a decidedly advanced degree of skill in a particular endeavor at a very early age, as well as a very disciplined type of motivation. It is interesting to note that the derivation of the words *precocious* or *precocity* comes from the ancient Greek word for "precooked" and connotes the idea of early ripening.

Superior is a comparative term. When a child is classified as "superior," we would like to know to whom, or what group, he or she is superior, and to what degree. A child may be markedly superior to the majority of children in a specific mental ability such as verbal comprehension and at the same time be equally inferior in spatial relations or memory. The looseness of the term limits its usage in most cases to broad generalization. A *high IQ* may be anything, depending on what it is higher than.

Rapid learner is a helpful term in understanding giftedness, because it is a distinct characteristic manifested by the identified gifted child.

The term *exceptional* is appropriate when referring to the gifted child as being different in the characteristics listed earlier.

At this point it is important to bring into focus a term that continues to be tossed around altogether too loosely in reference to education of the gifted. That term is *elitism*.

By derivation, *elite* means the choice, or best, or superior part of a body or class of persons. However, time and an overemphasis on egalitarianism have imparted a negative connotation to the word, implying snobbishness, selectivity, and unfair special attention.

But in fact, gifted children are elite in the same way that anyone becomes a champion, a record-holder, a soloist, an inventor, or a leader in important realms of human endeavor. Therefore, their parents have a distinct responsibility to challenge those who cry "elitism" and explain to them the true meaning of the term.

The only reason for mentioning these terms—and there are many more—is to caution parents that semantics and language usage can be tricky and confusing. Thus, *your* personal understanding and application of the term *gifted* becomes doubly important.

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